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ABSTRACT

Education was so much a part of Jewish thought and way of life that it was often taken for granted, e.g., the early sages never wrote an articulated plan for education principles and practices. The introduction to this overview of traditional Jewish education discusses the basic concepts of belief in the efficacy of education, the integration of learning and action, and education as a continual process, training for work, and encompassing the teaching of history. The paper's first section presents an historical overview, examining the Biblical period, the period of the Geonim, the Middle Ages, and Jewish education in Eastern Europe following the Middle Ages. The second and major portion of the paper explores the course of study in Jewish schools and the role of Jewish texts in the educational process. The beliefs and folklore connected with education are discussed, alphabet instruction in the kheder (Jewish school for children aged six to thirteen) is examined, the course of study over the life cycle is illustrated, and the philosophical underpinnings of the educational system are described. (RM)

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Traditional Jewish Learning:

Philosophy and Practice

Susan Pollak

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Introduction

The search for knowledge, the quest for an understanding of the meaning of life and the effort to pass on that meaning from generation to generation has stood at the very heart of Judaism and the Jewish way of life since biblical times. There has been a continuous emphasis on the transmission of ideas and practices throughout Jewish history. In fact, the chief preoccupation of the Jewish sages was learning and teaching the Torah and the Talmud.

During the First and Second Commonwealth, a period of approximately one-thousand years of Jewish self-government, the process of developing the way of the good life and teaching it to the people was the major responsibility of the nation's judges, priests and prophets. After the conquest of Palestine by the Romans and the forced dispersion of the Jews, The Book became a sort of portable homeland. The loss of geographical unity helped strengthen the desire to preserve a sense of spiritual continuity. Community of ideas took the place of physical community, and the Jews became known as the "People of the Book." The transmission of a complete system of ideas served as a bulwark against disintegration, and thus education became the most central of Jewish values.¹

Jewish educational concepts did not develop in isolation, but were influenced by, and in turn exerted influence on the educational theories of Egypt, Persia, Greece and Rome. Yet due to the relative inaccessibility of original Jewish sources, the Jewish contribution to the conceptual aspects of education is generally not recognized in works on the history of education. Classical Jewish education

is often described as an outgrowth of Greek education or relegated to obscurity. However, education was so much a part of Jewish thought and way of life that it was often taken for granted; the early sages often did not consider it necessary to set down an articulated plan of educational principles and practices. In a parallel sense, the advanced conceptions of social ethics, abundant in the Jewish classical writings, were not preserved as an organized system but rather as dynamic expressions on how to live. ²

There are some fundamental concepts of education, found in records of earlier eras, that continued to be stressed through subsequent periods of Jewish history. Among the basic concepts of education that have been utilized, the following points incorporate the most enduring and important educational ideas.

- ✓ 1) A faith in the efficacy of education, and the belief that human character is modifiable and improvable.
- 2) Learning and action must be integrated; knowledge of ethics must be expressed in proper conduct.
- 3) Education is a continual process, to be carried on literally from the cradle to the grave.
- 4) Environment is an important factor in the educative process.
- 5) Education, to be most effective, must start with the very young.
- 6) Individual differences must be recognized among students.
- 7) The process of education must be gradual—from the known to the unknown, from the simple to the complex, and from the immediate to the remote.
- 8) Responsibility for education rests with the parents and the community.
- 9) Training for work is seen as both essential and honorable.
- 10) The teaching of history is regarded as an illustration of the continuity and meaning of

Jewish experience.³

Historical Overview

The Biblical Period

Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament, was supreme, invisible, imageless and the ruler of all human destinies. As the one God, he tolerated no compromise with the tribal practices of paganism. This explicit concept of the unity of God and the implicit concept of the unity of mankind were so deeply a part of Jewish thought that all subsequent conceptions of life and education sprang from it.

In the Biblical period, there were many theological concepts and ethical precepts which man had to obey in order to live as a social being. A failure to fulfill Divine commandments was considered the cause of human misfortunes and national disasters. This is not to imply that the Hebrew masses fully understood or accepted the concepts of monotheism and morality. The religious leaders were well aware of the tendency to relapse into paganism and they spared no effort in counteracting that tendency and in educating the people in the ways of the good life. In every book of the Bible, this concern for education and the application of ethical principles is emphasized. People were repeatedly admonished not to forsake Divine laws, but to pass them on from one generation to another.

Thus education, which was both religious and moral, served to bind the people together and aided in their survival through centuries of invasion, servitude and oppression. The Scriptures

form the primary source for many of the educational theories that recur throughout Jewish history, many of which are as important now as they were in the days of the Jewish commonwealth.

Mankind, seen as a group that was born of the common flesh and blood, subject to universal desires, aspirations, temptations and weaknesses, was considered to be capable of improvement, and therefore of learning. All people were exhorted to seek out wisdom, and to learn of its blessings.

Happy is the man that findeth wisdom,
And the man that obtaineth understanding...
Her ways are ways of pleasantness
And all her paths are peace (Prov. 3:13, 18)

Get wisdom, get understanding...
Yea, with all thy getting get understanding...
I have taught thee in the way of wisdom...
Take fast hold of instruction, let her not go;
Keep her, for she is thy life (Prov. 4:4, 13)

Knowledge of the Law and its observance held equal importance. It was thought that the bonds of the nation were strengthened through learning, which included proper ethical behavior.

And Moses called unto all Israel and said unto them:
"Hear, O Israel, the statutes and the ordinances which
I speak in your ears this day that ye may learn them
and observe to do them." (Deut. 5:1).

And thou shalt teach them the statutes and the laws and
shalt show them the way wherein they must walk and the
work that they must do. (Ex. 18:20).

The concept that learning was a continual process, operating at all times and in all places, was stressed from the very beginning of the history of the Jews.

And ye shall teach them your children, talking of them, when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way and when thou liest down and when thou risest up (Deut. 11:19).

Education was to begin when the child was very young.

Train up a child in the way he should go, And even when he is old, he will not depart from it (Prov, 22:6)

While accepting the fact that all human beings are capable of improving and learning, the sages pointed out that individual differences in students must be taken into account. The stories of Jacob and Esau, of Issac and Ishmael, illustrate the way these differences were perceived.

Even a child maketh himself known by his doings whether his work be pure and whether it be right (Prov. 20:11).

The Prophets, who were largely concerned with the instruction of the masses, stressed the necessity of using gradual means to impart knowledge.

Whom shall one teach knowledge?
For it is precept by precept, precept by precept, line by line, line by line, here a little, there a little (Is.28:10)

In the teachings of the Prophets the emphasis was upon action and ethical behavior.

And what the Lord doth require of thee: only to do justly, and to love mercy and walk humbly with thy God. (Mic. 6:8).

The Postbiblical Period

The restoration of a Jewish community in Palestine after

the Babylonian Exile brought about a number of changes in the concept of education. The role of the Prophet gradually diminished, and the temple priests concerned themselves more and more with religious functions. The function of education was entrusted to the scribe, and its importance was stressed as never before.

The scribes were scholars, without an official designation or office, who steeped themselves in the study of Sacred Wisdom and imparted this knowledge to their disciples. This conjunction-- the teacher and his circle of students-- became a characteristic motif of Jewish life for centuries. The scribe was a leader in the community as well as one of its most learned members.

Teaching, irrespective of the subject, was based on the continuity of tradition. Instruction meant conveying the interpretations of preceding scholars. While there was room for originality and many scholars did forge new paths in law and commentary, no break with tradition was tolerated. Teachers and disciples were regarded as the nation's elite, men who considered the learning of the Law as the very purpose of life. The great teachers won widespread recognition and their views were regarded as authoritative.

A new system of schools gradually came into being. Young children studied the Scriptures in a school called the Bet Ha-Sefer; the older children, particularly those showing intellectual promise, studied at an institution of higher learning called the Bet Ha-Midrash. For the mass of people there was the Bet Ha-Keneset, a rather democratic institution where members of the community participated in discussions concerning both the Oral and Written Law. This latter school could be organized by any group of ten people, and non-Jews were welcomed as well. At meetings every

Sabbath a portion of the Scriptures was read and discussed by all the participants. The Bet Ha-Keneset became a house of prayer, and in its final metamorphosis was known as the synagogue, from the Greek term for Bet Ha-Keneset (House of Assembly). ⁴

A succession of teachers carried on the study and interpretation of the holy writings. The scribes interpreted the Bible in terms of its application to daily life, evolving a set of traditions which were later expounded and codified in the Mishna. This compilation of traditional lore was the work of over a hundred scholars, the Tannaim. They were succeeded by generations of Amoraim, commentators on the set tradition. The work of all these generations of scholars was eventually collected into one body of decisions and opinions that formed the Gemara. The Mishna and the Gemara were combined to form the collection of thought and law known as the Talmud. ⁵

In 65 B.C.E., before the fall of the Jewish state, a reformer named Simon ben Shatah established schools of advanced studies for men in every part of the country. Later in the same century Joshua ben Gamala started elementary school for boys of age six to seven. The teachers for these schools were supported and appointed by the community. These institutions can be thought of as the first examples of free public education in the Jewish community.

The notion that all people were capable of being educated and that education was necessary for all appears as well in the writings of the postbiblical period.

As water is free for all, so is the Torah free for all.
 As water is priceless, so is the Torah priceless. As
 water brings life to the world, so the Torah brings life
 to the world. As water brings a man out of his uncleanness,
 so the Torah brings a man from the evil way into the good
 way. As wine does not remain good in vessels of gold and
 silver, but only in cheap earthenware vessels, so the words
 of the Torah remain pure only with him who makes himself
 lowly. Like wine, the words of the Torah rejoice the heart.
 As wine grows better by keeping, so the words of the Law
 become better as a man grows older. 6

The idea that learning and action must be interconnected is
 a constant motif.

An ignorant man cannot be saintly. 7

He whose works exceed his wisdom, his wisdom endures;
 but he whose wisdom exceeds his works, his wisdom does
 not endure. 8

Which is greater, study or doing? Rabbi Akiba answered:
 Study. The majority agreed that study is greater, for
 study leads to doing. 9

The young child, seen as very impressionable, was likened to untouched
 paper. Thus it was necessary to begin education at an early age.

He that learns as a child, to what is he like? To
 ink written on new paper. He that learns as an old
 man, to what is he like? To ink written on paper that
 has been blotted out. 10

The sages of the Mishna spoke of varying abilities of students
 in the following ways:

Some hear (perceive) with facility and lose with facility.
 Some hear with facility and lose with difficulty. Some
 hear with difficulty and lose with facility. Some hear
 with difficulty and lose with difficulty. 11

It is a custom of the world that a thousand people go in
 to study the Bible, a hundred complete it satisfactorily;
 one hundred proceed to the study of Mishna, ten of them
 complete it satisfactorily; ten advance to the study of
 the Talmud, only one completes it successfully. 12

The rabbis of the Mishna introduced a system of gradation in education, and cautioned against introducing advanced studies at an early age.

At five years one is fit for Scripture, at ten years for Mishna, at thirteen for the fulfilling of the Commandments, at fifteen for the Talmud. 13

Just as water descends drop by drop until it becomes a stream, so it is with the words of the Torah-- a man studies two laws today and two laws tomorrow until it becomes a living spring. 14

Education was a shared responsibility of the entire community, and learning was to take place in groups, not in solitude.

Form groups for the purpose of study, for Torah can be acquired only in a group. 15

The teacher was to guide the student to knowledge rather than forcing him to study. The teacher's attitude was to be sympathetic, understanding and generous.

If you see a student who finds his studies as difficult as iron it is because his teacher does not take the proper attitude toward him. 16

An impatient man cannot teach. 17

As with perfume, any one who desires may be made fragrant by it, so the scholar should be willing to teach any one who desires to profit by his learning. 18

The Period of the Geonim

The Jewish academies of Palestine and Babylonia, which had been closed for a brief duration during the sixth century, were reopened in 589 C.E. under the direction of the Geonim, the heads of the academy. This period has been described as the "Middle

Age of Jewish history or the dark age, dark in the sense of obscure. No period in the history of postexilic Israel is more momentous than this and none so obscure." 19

In the period the Talmud increasingly gained importance, and became the comprehensive guide to Jewish conduct in everyday life. There was also an increased interest in interpreting talmudic Judaism in the light of Greco-Arabic philosophy. This was fostered by the Kalla, academic conferences which were established in talmudic times but continued throughout the Geonic period. The Kalla assembled twice a year, and it was open to all who desired advanced education in Jewish lore. The Kalla then served as a free school of higher education, and attracted students from all sections of the country. During this period there was a great concern for education, and the spread of knowledge to distant communities. Again, education was regarded as a major responsibility for the entire community.

If thou shalt bear sons and daughter... purchase for them books according to the best of your ability, and arrange to provide a teacher for them at a tender age. 20

The Middle Ages

The dissolution of the Roman Empire after the barbarian invasion spelled the beginning of that civilization's decline. In many places learning virtually disappeared, and the monastery became the sole place of study. The monk was often the only literate person.

Jewish learning, however, continued and even flourished during the medieval period. In many ways the Jews helped in the rebirth of civilization in Europe, disseminating Greek culture as interpreted by the Arabs. Jews were central in the Spanish cultural revival and in the early renaissance in Provence. ²¹

Jewish communities along the Mediterranean shores and in northern Europe had developed an educational system which was an integral part of their everyday life. Religious thought and education were closely allied. In fact, a Jewish community without a school was as rare as one without a synagogue. The scholar was the most respected member of the community, the ignoramus the most despised. To the medieval Jew, study was as important as prayer. The synagogue functioned as more than a refuge from persecution and misery; it was a place where a world of truth and justice was envisioned.

In the progressive Arab countries, educational facilities were relatively easy to organize, and education developed a wider scope than in Christian Europe. In Arabic Spain and in Provence and Italy the curriculum of study included the Bible and the Talmud as well as secular subjects--philosophy, mathematics, geometry, astronomy, medicine, poetry and music.

In northern France, Germany, and other central European countries the Jews confined their studies to religious matters, and education was based solely on the Bible and the Talmud.

There was no fixed pattern of education, as the Jewish communities were so dispersed. In general, the training of

children started in the home, continued in an elementary school, and from there the student went to a religious academy, where a famous and learned scholar presided.

In Germany there were schools for advanced learning which had an almost monastic focus. There were also "wandering students," young men who travelled from academy to academy to study with the great teachers of the time. The teacher's task was to educate and to inculcate a respect for the traditions and their application in daily life.

Teachers were paid by parents when they gave private instruction at home, and by the community when they taught at a community school. Talented children of poor parents were educated at the expense of the community, and funds were raised through a special school tax. Education was compulsory in nearly every Jewish community and school attendance started when the child was very young, at the age of four or five. Eventually the old biblical principle of volunteer instruction was discarded and teaching became a profession, but the form of remuneration varied from community to community.

An extensive literature on education was produced during the medieval period. Since education was already accepted as a virtue, most of the writers concerned themselves with the enrichment of prevailing standards. They discussed methods of arousing public interest in educational values, ways to improve pedagogical techniques, and recommended subject matter for differing age groups. There seemed to be a general agreement that study was not to be undertaken merely for the enjoyment of knowledge. Professions and

trades were recognized as necessary for maintaining a place in society, and training for these jobs was encouraged. However, learning was considered to be the basis of ethical conduct in daily matters.

During the medieval period a number of different modes of Biblical and Talmudic interpretation arose. Rashi (1040-1105), who lived during the Crusades, composed a monumental commentary on the Bible and the Talmud. Hai ben Sherira (d. 1038) outlined the principles of education as being a continuation of the tradition from biblical times. Study had no other purpose than the acquisition of knowledge and sound judgment. The course of study was to include virtually all the known sciences of the period: religion, Divine law, philosophy, mathematics, medicine, and calendar computation. A man of education was to be gentle, always striving to understand the unknown. He was expected to rise early in the morning, have a book in his hand at all times, and ask questions of those who were more learned than himself.

Judah ibn Tibbon was the founder of a family of scholars and translators who brought to Europe a knowledge of Arab civilization and Arab studies of the Greek philosophers. In his treatise, Father's Admonition, written in the form of a will to his young son, ibn Tibbon combined his ideas on education with rules for the good life. He advised his son to devote himself to science and religion. In many ways, ibn Tibbon's ideas paralleled those of al-Ghazzali (the Islamic philosopher) that there were only two sciences; ethics and physics. He encouraged his son to excel in both.

Ibn Tibbon was a lover of books and advised his son on their proper care. He told his son to have three or four copies of books so that he could lend them to friends who could not afford their own. He wrote, "My son, make thy books thy companions, let thy cases and shelves be thy pleasure grounds and gardens. Bask in their paradise, gather their fruit, pluck their roses, take their spices and their myrrh. If thy soul be satiate and weary, change from garden to garden, from furrow to furrow, from scene to scene. Then will thy desire renew itself, and thy soul be filled with manifold delight." 22

Moses Maimonides, a physician and scholar, had great influence on the promotion of secular studies among Jews, but had little interest in poetry and history. He advised young men to study languages and philosophy and the sciences. Jacob Anatoli (b. 1194) a fervent admirer of Maimonides, represented the renaissance in southern France. He interpreted the Bible according to Maimonides method--rationally, philosophically, and allegorically. Anatoli deplored the fact that the Rabbis of the time neglected the study of the Bible for talmudic dialectics. He felt that scientific investigation was essential for comprehension of religion.

Joseph ben Judah Aknim (1160-1226) was one of the foremost educators of his age. His book, Healing of the Soul, outlined requirements for teachers. A teacher was to know his subject so thoroughly that he could detect errors in fundamental premises. The teacher's attitude to his pupil was of that between father and child--warmth and concern were considered to be essential qualities in the teacher. The teacher was required to conduct himself according

to ethical principles and to encourage his students to do the same. The curriculum was to include reading, writing and grammar. At the age of fifteen the pupil was to start the study of the Talmud, followed by the secular sciences. Poetry and medicine were to be taught along with the natural sciences, practical mechanics and medicine.

Judah ben Samuel Abbas, who lived in the thirteenth century, wrote about education in his treatise, Illumination of the Path. Abbas advised starting the education of the child at the age of three, so that by the age of thirteen he would have mastered the Bible, Hebrew, and Aramaic languages. By the age of eighteen he should have mastered the Mishna, the Talmud, the commentaries of Maimonides and Rashi. After that he was to devote himself to the study of philosophy and secular sciences.

Joseph ibn Caspi (1297-1340) was also an admirer of Maimonides. He wrote an ethical guide, Book of Admonition and Guide to Knowledge. This work outlined a program of study leading to the good life, emphasizing that good deeds were more important than the acquisition of knowledge. His program of study was arranged so that until the age of fourteen the student was to learn the Scriptures and the Talmud. After fourteen he was to study mathematics and philosophy, the book of Proverbs, the mishnaic Fathers and Aristotle's Ethics. At the age of eighteen natural sciences were added, and at twenty, the student could start on metaphysics.

Solomon Alami, in his Letter of Admonition (1415) was opposed to the trend of integrating Greek philosophy with the interpretation of the Law of Moses. Alami reproached the talmudists

for indulging in hairsplitting arguments, the modernists for cloaking the Torah in Greek philosophy, and the wealthy for neglecting to observe religious tradition. He stressed the true purpose of study, the acquisition of knowledge. This reformer declared that man must use his wealth to acquire knowledge and not his knowledge to acquire wealth. ²³

Therefore, it is evident that Jewish thought followed a pattern of continuity from earlier times. Basic concepts such as the necessity for universal education and the ability of the individual to improve through it became the rules for the structure of life. The method of transmitting education was improved and scholars devoted much time to the practical aspects of the educational process.

There was a strong emphasis on learning through participation. The Passover Seder is centered around participation of the young who ask the traditional four questions. Every element of the ritual festival is designed to provoke questions by the children.

The medieval scholars also recognized that the study of the Torah was a lifelong process which must never end, and they adhered to the principle that the simple must precede the complex for the process of education to work.

First they would teach the children to recognize the letters, then to join them together. Afterwards to read the words and then the sentences and after that the portion. ²⁴

In order that he should understand the language of the Talmud it is necessary for him to study the Bible in its Aramaic translation. Then he ought to start reading the first prophets to help him understand the arrangement

of their words and letters and subjects. Each sentence should be read first in Hebrew and then in his own language.²⁵

Jewish Education in Eastern Europe

The migration of Jews from western to eastern Europe occurred in the centuries following the Middle Ages. The vast majority of Jews settled in Russian and Poland and in neighboring countries. Education continued to be a consuming interest.

In Poland, education was compulsory for children from six to thirteen, and was under the supervision of the authorities. The curriculum of the kheder was prescribed by the community, down to the details of the commentaries to be used and the number of students per teacher. Community authorities regulated the appointment of teachers and provided free education for orphans, as well as vocational education for those children who did not pursue study in the Talmud.

The principle educational institutions, described in depth below, were the kheder, the yeshiva, and the talmud Torah. To the extent that the Bible, the Mishna, the Talmud and the Codes were the means of regulating the life of the Jewish community, their study had the functional value of preparing students for life in the Jewish community.

The Role of the Text in Jewish Education

The school is often thought of in Jewish tradition as second only to the synagogue. When the Romans destroyed Jewish national independence, the first thing that Rabbi Jokhanan Ben Zakai did to preserve the Jewish tradition was to create the school in Yabneh. This emphasis has continued into contemporary times as well.

The community is unimaginable without a center of learning, be it the kheder, for the young children, a talmud torah, for those parents who cannot pay tuition, a yeshiva for higher learning, or a bes hamidrash for prayers as well as study.

This section will explore in more depth the course of study in these schools and the role that the text plays in the educational process. The case of the shetl in Eastern Europe has been chosen as a paradigmatic form of traditional Jewish education.²⁶

The first portion of the paper will treat some of the beliefs and folklore connected with education. The second part will deal with the specific example of alphabet instruction in the kheder. The third section illustrates the course of study over the lifecycle, and the last portion will examine the philosophical underpinnings of the educational system.

Study as an Ideal-- Beliefs Underlying Education

Study has been regarded as the duty, the privilege and the joy of the Jewish male. If his job does not permit him to devote his life to study, he will try to study in the morning before work, in the evening after work, or on the Sabbath.

Study is not a voluntary but a prescribed task. Furthermore, to study is a mitsva, a deed that is commanded by God. To share one's

learning is also a mitsva.

A Jew without learning is incomplete. He is an ignoramus, an amoretz, the most despised member of the community. There is a saying in the Talmud, "Better a learned bastard than an ignorant priest." The language is rich with expressions for a learned man: lerner, masmid, kharif, talmid khokhom, ben tora, iluy, lamdan, etc, words which are used in everyday speech.²⁷

It is learning that gives prestige, respect, authority, and status, at least among the shtetl Jews in Eastern Europe. It is learning that forms the primary basis, at least in principle, for social stratification. In the shtetl, Jewish society was divided into two: the Proste Yidn and the Sheyne Yidn, the common Jews and the beautiful Jews. Yet the notion of beauty is based on spiritual values, not on physical appearance. The Sheyne Yidn are given the seats of honor in the synagogue. The Proste Yidn, the artisans, workmen, etc. are given seats further from the place of honor, the Eastern wall (Jews face east when they pray because it is in the direction of Jerusalem.)

A learned man belongs to the Sheyne Yidn, since learning is the main basis for social stratification. A really learned man cannot be a common Jew, but a very rich man may be, if he lacks learning. Mark Zborowski establishes three main criteria of status: 1. Learning, 2. ikhus, or family status, and 3. money. The ideal combination is learning and wealth, as these assure family status. The Jewish mother's dream, as expressed by a folksong, is to have her son
²⁸
 "a talmid khokhom and also a clever business man." (These dreams again, refer to the shtetl Jews, not necessarily to the ancient or medieval period.)

The learned man is considered to be the pride of the community,

and even more so, the pride of the family. "May he be raised for the Torah, for the wedding, and for doing good deeds" is the wish uttered when a son is born. The more learned men a family includes, either by birth or marriage, the greater is its ikhus.

Jewish parents dream of marrying their daughter to a learned youth, or their son to the daughter of a learned father. The sages have said, "A man should sell all he has in order to get for his son a bride, who is the daughter of a scholar."²⁹ The dowry of a girl is proportional to the scholarship of the prospective bridegroom. Rich Jews would go to the Yeshiva and inquire as to who was the best student; they would then seek this student for a son-in-law. The outstanding student would receive not only a hefty dowry, but a number of years of kest-- of board at the home of his parents-in-law so that he might continue his studies. Thus the saying, "Torah is di beste skhore" or "The Torah is the best commodity." It was even correct for the wife of a gifted scholar to earn a livelihood for the family while he remains with his books, and for the community to subsidize the poor student. These rules do not apply in other situations. If a man were not devoting himself to study, he would be scorned as a ne'er-do-well for letting his wife support him, and he would be despised as a beggar if he lived off the community.

Parents seek a learned man not only out of a desire to augment the family's social status, but also out of a genuine respect for intellectual prowess. Learning was viewed, as it had been in Greek society, as a guarantee of high moral and social standards. An amoretz is not only an unlearned man, but also one who does not know how to behave socially, one with low ethical principles, who will treat his wife without respect.

The value acquired from learning is thought to transfer to the next generation. Thus it is assumed that a wise father will produce wise offspring, while the child of an amoret will probably be an amoret as well. It is a basic principle of Jewish education that the fact of learning the rules of behavior causes one to behave accordingly.

There is yet another reason for seeking a learned husband for the unwed daughter. Learning is thought to assure the future life, the Olam Habo. A woman by herself has little chance of gaining Olam Habo. She is inferior to men, (who give daily thanks that they were not created women), and moreover, she does not study-- learning is for men only. She can, however, reap part of her husband's Olam Habo, especially if she facilitates his studies by running the house and earning a living. Thus her reward for these humdrum tasks is a share of her husband's eternal happiness. These hopes for the girl are expressed in a lullaby:

Under (insert name) cradle
 Stands a snow-white kid
 The kid went off to trade
 With raisins and almonds
 But what is the best trade?
 (Baby's) bride-groom will learn
 Torah he will learn
 Holy books will he write
 And good and pious
 Shall (Baby) remain. 30

The prestige associated with learning influences parent/child relationships, for learning erases the difference in age that is so important in Jewish social life. There is usually a separation according to age, and seniority is accorded the most honor. A child is thought to be an incomplete member of society,

and as such he gets very little attention from the adult men. Yet grownups not only encourage the presence of children in temple, but they even insist on it, as it is essential to a Jewish education. The whole father-son relationship changes as soon as the boy begins to learn, and his prestige increases in proportion to his progress in his studies. The first real mark of respect a boy receives is when he passes his elementary studies and enters the next stage, the gemara kheder.

A boy who is studying the Talmud is considered almost an adult, especially when he shows special facility. He can participate in the debates of adults, and his opinion carries equal weight. A boy who is known as a genius, iluy, will be shown the same deference as a learned adult. In fact, the Jewish ideal of male beauty reflects the emphasis on intellect. A man who has a hadras ponim, a distinguished face, ideally has a long beard--a symbol of age and wisdom, a high forehead (indicating highly developed mental abilities), a pale complexion--revealing long hours spent over books at night, thick eyebrows--showing penetration, that jut out over deep-set, semi-closed eyes--indicating weariness from constant pouring over books, eyes that sparkle with wit as soon as an intellectual problem is discussed. Also important are the small, pale hands, confirming the fact that the owner is not engaged in manual trade, but has devoted his life to study. 31

There is a certain decorum expected from the learned man. He walks slowly, sedately, absorbed in his thoughts. His speech is calm, and filled with quotations from the Bible or the Talmud. He seldom laughs, as excessive laughter is considered the mark

of an amoretts.

In view of the advantages attached to scholarship--status, prestige, a rich wife, the joy of the study itself-- it is understandable that the career of a scholar is the most desired one. The boy is prodded toward scholarship from infancy. In the cradle he will listen to his mother's lullabies:

Sleep soundly at night and learn Torah by day
And thou'lt be a Rabbi when I have grown grey.

or

My Yankele shall learn the Law
The law shall baby learn
Great books shall my Yankele write
Much money shall he earn.

or

A boy who'll study the Gemara
The father will listen with happiness and joy
A boy who grows to be a talmid khokhom...33

The child's education begins as soon as the baby learns to talk. The mother teaches him religious blessings and sometimes a few simple Hebrew words. But more important, the child is steeped in the atmosphere and spirit of learning. Much of the father's time at home is spent over his books. While the father studies, he will take the little boy on his lap to point out the letters. The child also becomes used to the sounds of learning-- the nigumor chant that is uttered as the scholar reads-- to the father's continual swaying as he studies, to the importance of a book.

While the father will not object if the child turns the page, or if he opens or closes the book, one thing is strictly prohibited--to damage the book or throw it on the floor. The child is taught from infancy to respect a book, even to hold it in reverence. He is taught to respect the whole process of learning. When the father is studying, he must be quiet, and no noisy games are permitted. Thus learning becomes a frequent topic of family conversation, of mother's lullabies, of blessings, of wishes and of actions, and especially of exhortations that the child receives from day to day.

Once the child starts school, he is the "jewel" of the family. Every Saturday the father will quiz him, while the teacher sits by and the mother looks on. Each new step in the curriculum is an occasion for family celebration, at home and in the synagogue. At such celebrations the boy must prove his intellectual mettle and his progress by an original interpretation of a sentence from the Bible. If the boy shows talent and enthusiasm, the family is happy and proud. If he is indifferent or incompetent, he will be reproached, and his future will be painted in appalling colors: "What will you be? A tailor? A shoemaker? An amoret? The father will try to encourage the boy's intellect by threats, punishments and even beatings. One person is quoted as saying, "When my father beat me for playing hookey from kheder, he would say, 'You'll become a talmid khokhom even if I have to kill you!'" 34

Alphabet Instruction in the Kheder

In many traditional societies a child's first reading lessons were celebrated and imbued with folklore. This was very much the case for alphabet instruction in the kheder. The Hebrew alphabet has been regarded as having both intrinsic and essential value--nothing is seen as accidental. There are rabbinic interpretations on the shapes of the letters, the vowels, the crowns and other letter ornaments, as well as the numerical value of the letters. In fact, many legends speak of the role of the alphabet in the creation of the world.³⁵ This attitude toward the worth of the letters themselves remained constant throughout the centuries, and every detail, including the mode of teaching the letters, was invested with meaning. Thus kheder memoirs of alphabet instruction, written even hundreds of years apart, remain almost identical. The following description is based on seventeenth century sources from both East and West European Jews.³⁶

There were several age groups in each kheder, and no fixed age for beginning school. Thus there was never really one day when a teacher faced a class of entirely new students. The children were brought in for alphabet lessons when their parents thought they were ready or could not be cared for during the day. A boy's first day in school was then his alone.

On the first day of school the three or four year old boy was carried to the kheder by his father. He sat next to the melamed, or teacher, who showed him a few letters from the alphabet. The father stood behind the boy and threw candies or coins on to the open book. The child was told, "an angel threw this down so that you will want to study." ³⁷

The child was given cakes, cookies and a hardboiled egg to eat. Each was inscribed with one or more of these biblical passages:

Moses commanded us a law, an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob. (Deut. 33:4)

God has given me the tongue of them that are learned. (Isa 50:4)

And He said to me, son of man eat this scroll that I give you. Then I ate it and it was as sweet as honey. (Ezek 3:3)

How sweet are Your words on my palate, sweeter than honey. (Psalms 119: 103)

The alphabet chart was smeared with honey and the child was invited to lick it off. The other kheder children, who watched, were also given sweets.

In the medieval period the first day of school was one of the major rituals, comparable in importance to a wedding. It was more elaborate than the bar mitzvah ceremony. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the first alphabet lesson was much less elaborate.

The connection between the alphabet and food is an important one. This relationship is common in folk societies, where education is thought to be analagous to ingestion. Memory does not entail the mind alone, and knowledge, like food, leads to sustenance as well as protection. Amulets for children often took the form of food. In Eastern Europe children would carry garlic, cinnamon or salt in a pocket. Often a piece of the Passover afikoymen (matzoh) was sewn into an undergarment. Male children were not allowed to eat certain foods, such as the end pieces of bread, or cakes baked from dough remnants, as these were said to "clog the brain" and obstruct the memory. There were other foods that were believed to

improve the memory, such as honey and the hearts or brains of animals. In some communities boys were given challah yeast dissolved in water to drink so that the Torah would grow inside the child as the challah rises on the outside.³⁸ In fact Rashi, the biblical commentator, interpreted the word "eating" in allegorical fashion--one should approach learning as eagerly as one approaches food to satiate one's hunger. Thus one metaphor for traditional teaching was "eating," and knowledge had to be swallowed by the growing child.

The Art of Mnemonics

The candies thrown on the first lesson book or alphabet chart sweeten only the first hours of learning. After that, there is no attempt to sugar coat the subject matter. The kheder room in which the children studied from 8am to 6pm was usually small and poorly furnished, filled with 15-20 children of varying ages. The textbooks contained no pictures, there was no storytelling, and few educational games were employed. The centuries-old method of repeating the words, memorizing each letter, each word and finally the meaning of each word and each sentence was employed. Thus mnemonics played an important part in the educational process.

Mnemonic devices usually come into use in traditions where there is a large oral literature. A well trained memory was a particularly valued skill in the age before printing. Even in cultures which have a written language mnemonics are still used in teaching certain religious practices. The art of memory, or mnemotechnics, was invented by the Greeks, passed on to the Romans, and designed to function as a sort of "inner shorthand"

39
for adult orators.

Literary mnemonics were particularly well developed in the Jewish educational process. Verbal associations in the form of riddles, word plays and calendar devices were known in the talmudic and post-talmudic periods. Mnemonics of all types have been used in traditional Jewish education. In fact, the Talmud states the necessity of such devices. "The Torah cannot be retained except through signs." ⁴⁰ (Erubin 54b).

Alphabet metaphor was one of the most widely used mnemonics among East European Jews. Individual letters were compared to familiar shapes or to human limbs. For instance, an alef looks like a water carrier, a shin has three little heads. Letters were also used as initials for key words in moral and midrashic stories, i.e. the giml has a money bag at his side and is always ready to give to charity.

The oldest reference to alphabet metaphors appears in the Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 104a. The following is a homiletic interpretation of all the names of the Hebrew letters based on their graphic appearance.

The Rabbis told R. Joshua b. Levi: Children have come to the Beth Hamidrash and said things the like of which was not said even in the days of Joshua ben Nun: Alep beys means learn wisdom. Giml daled, show kindness to the poor. Why is the foot of the giml stretched toward the daled? Because it is fitting for the benevolent to run after the poor. And why is the roof of the daled stretched out toward the giml? Because he must make himself available to him. And why is the face of the daled turned away from the giml? Because he (giml) must give him (daled) help in secret, lest he shame him. 41

This passage is frequently quoted as a source of information

on third century Jewish education.

Thus, these alphabet metaphors are mnemonics which associate the shape and not the sound or name of the letters with something that is already known to the child. The child's task is to use this mnemonic in making associations between the shape and the name of the letter. What we call phonics, reading the sound of the letter, had no role in the beginning stage of reading instruction.

Some children, when left on their own, begin to produce mnemonics similar to the devices employed over centuries of kheder teaching. In many ways, these associations can be thought of as the first stages of creativity in learning. The following passage, from a kheder memoir, recounts the case of a private mnemonic system.

From the first day on which the belfer showed me the letters of the alphabet set out in rows, I saw leaping forth the measured ranks of soldiers like those who at times passed in front of our house, with their drummer, rattling tum tararum tum, at their head. Those that most resembled this were the alefs, all arms swinging and legs striding...

The other letter also had their various aspects for me. They looked like beasts of burden and wild animals and birds and fish and utensils, or simply like weird creatures, the like of which I had not yet seen in this world. The shin was a sort of horned snake with three heads. The lamed was clearly nothing but a stork stretching out its neck and standing on one leg, similar to the one that dwelt in the tree-top behind our house. The giml was a jack-boot, like the one shown on the tims of shoe-polish, where a little devil with a tail polishes diligently. The daled was a sort of pickaxe... 42

The earliest relics of alphabet teaching that we have are wood and pottery tablets which functioned as school boys' slates. This would then suggest that writing was part of the first reading lesson

for students in Jewish schools at the beginning of the Common Era. Children copied or traced the letters one at a time in various orders and combinations. Islamic primary education⁴³ began with letter tracing as well.

Pedagogy

The alphabet sessions in the kheder were usually individual sessions lasting from 10-15 minutes, and were given one to three times a day. The teacher was seated and the child stood or sat at his side and recited from a shared alphabet sheet or prayerbook. The lessons, as were all kheder instructions, were aloud and chanted rhythmically.

In many ways, the chanted lessons were dialogues between the teacher and student. Most lessons were rhythmic, repetitive and soothing, as rhythm and melody were regarded as powerful aids to memory. The monotonous sing-songs for alphabet learning passed into oral tradition among Jews and were part of the reservoir of every kheder teacher.

The first letters a boy was shown in the kheder were in the context of a single holy word, phrase or sentence. Many kheder memoirs recount learning "Truth" or "God is Truth" on the first day of school.

At the beginning of the Common Era, the usual alphabet technique was writing two or three letters at a time on a slate with a stylus. The child would trace the form of the letter while pronouncing its name. In Eastern Europe, the alphabet utensil was not a pen, but a taytl, a pointer carved from wood or bone with a shaved, pointed end. It often had a hole carved in the end to allow

for a string attachment. Only wood or bone could be used, and never metal, as this was thought to be bad for the mind and the memory. The tatyl was treated with great care as it was an instrument connected with a religious commandment-- to teach the Hebrew alphabet to one's children. In many ways it was comparable to the pen of a Torah scribe. In the Middle Ages the shavings of a sharpened tatyl were not allowed to fall on to the floor, and it was not to be used for any other purpose; not as a tool, a stick of punishment, or a back scratcher.⁴⁴

The tatyl was usually held by the teacher as he traced the contours of a letter and chanted the letter's name. If a tatyl was not available, the child's right hand was held with the index finger pointed. The teacher guided the child's hand along the row of letters. The child was encouraged to use his finger as a pointer when he read on his own.

Alphabet instruction was almost always an individual lesson between the teacher and the child. However, one eighteenth century book for Jewish teachers recommends teaching the alphabet to students in pairs. The beginning student is seated next to a child who already knows the alphabet. The teacher gives each child a letter glued to a tablet and the children have to learn the names of both letters. When they can point out the letters in a prayerbook, the teacher then gives them a new pair of letters. This continues until the new student, with the help of the older child and the teacher, has learned the entire alphabet.⁴⁵

On the average, it took about six months for the three to five year old kheder student to learn the names of the entire Hebrew alphabet. The stages of learning begin with the identification

of a holy word, then proceed to knowing the order of the alphabet first forward and then backwards, and finally, additional permutations.. Letters which look similar and might be confused with each other were singled out for separate instruction. The students were drilled as well in consonants which can appear with or without a dagesh, a dot indicating a prolonged vocalization. 46

After a few months, when the child has mastered the basic mechanics of reading, he moves to "true" reading, ivri taytsh, or reading with translation. At that point he begins to study the Pentateuch, but does not begin with Genesis, the first book, but with Leviticus, the theory of sacrifices. 47 Studies of the first five books were combined with study of the commentary of Rashi. It was not enough for the child to understand the text and to translate it, commentary and interpretation were also necessary. The words and sentences were believed to have two meanings; a simple and direct one and a symbolic meaning. For example, when the Bible says that "When Sarah died her age was a hundred and twenty and seven years," the question must be asked, "Why the repetition of the 'and?'" The answer is that not only was she 127 years old at the time of year death, but at this age she looked as beautiful and as young as at the age of 20, and at that age she looked as beautiful and as young as a child of seven. 48 Thus, the child learns the direct meanings, as well as the involved interpretations and the search for hidden meaning.

Learning over the LifeCycle

Jewish learning doesn't end because the "Torah has no bottom."

It was with the Talmudic studies that the true joy of learning came about. In the elementary kheders the work was routine, mechanical and repetitious, while the study of the Talmud opened up the possibility of imagination and creativity.

The beginning of talmud studies has important implications for the boy's future. It is here, in the Gemara kheder, that he is put to the true test and it becomes evident whether or not he will become a talmid khokhm, a wise student. The boy (age 10-11) is called upon to display the caliber of his memory, his power to spend long hours over a difficult problem, using the various commentaries and interpretations with penetration and understanding.

The opinion of the boy's teacher is not enough. The father will also bring him to a famous scholar in the community who will examine the boy and give an opinion, which carries a great deal of weight. The big question is: Is the boy qualified to spend his life devoted to his studies, or should he interrupt them and go into trade or business?

If the boy is judged to have the needed capacity, he is sent from the Gemara kheder to the yeshiva, the highest institution of learning. While repetition was the keynote of the elementary kheder, independence and self-reliance characterize the yeshiva. There is no definite program of study, no set curriculum. Each student is allowed to study that which appeals to him, from the mysticism of the kabala, to the philosophy of Maimonides, to the legal questions of the Talmud. The approach, however, is the same: commentary, interpretation, and referring the texts to the Biblical quotations.

Much of talmudic study centers around debate. This is often referred to as pilpul, or pepper, because of its sharp, spicy and stimulating characteristics. This form of debate involves comparison of different interpretations, analysis of all possible aspects of a problem, and ultimately, the final solution of an almost insoluble problem. Thus the ideal result is the khidush - an original synthesis that has never been thought of before. The pilpul is viewed almost as a sport, involving both the performer and the audience.

While in the kheder the students repeated each and every word of the teacher, in the yeshiva the teacher is only a guide to the Talmudic literature. The teacher will assign a portion from the Talmud, usually some difficult, contradictory passage where the students have to make use of different commentaries and interpretations. The discussion of the problem is an exercise where the teacher as well as the student will try to excell. Zborowski describes a lesson in the yeshiva in the following manner:

Everyone of the students tries to place himself as near as possible to the platform where the teacher stands in order to be able to hear the explanation as clearly as possible. They are standing almost on top of each other... The lesson usually took two hours but was interrupted many times... Almost every sentence was challenged by the pupils who were placed higher than the others and who were shouting in order to contradict the words of the teacher who seemed to them to be an Angel of God. They did not behave with the *derekh erets* (deference) which forbids several people to interrupt. On the contrary, sometimes they attacked the teacher in groups to fight him, and it seemed as if the subject concerned them personally and they wanted to fight him in a struggle which knew no bounds. At this time the great teacher sat calmly and quietly without saying a word, as if he were thinking, "Go ahead, children, go ahead!" He did 49 not like those pupils who were quiet and silent.

But the yeshiva student could not live on the word of God alone. In order to study, the boy had to be assured of material subsistence. "Eyn kemakh, eyn Tora," says the proverb, "without bread there is no study." Very few of the students had parents who could support them, however. In these cases, the community would take over the burden of supporting not only the yeshiva itself, but the individual student as well. This is another example of the great importance attached to learning.

The system generally worked in the following way. Members of the community where a yeshiva is established board the individual students. At the beginning of the semester each member of the community offers to feed a student one day a week. The majority of the students subsisted by these "eating days" with different members of the community. It was said that the dream of a yeshiva student is "a house seven floors high; on each floor lives a rich man (nogid); and with each nogid I'll have a 'day.'" 50

The members of the community would offer "days" according to their economic status. A rich man would offer several days to several students, which a poor man only a small meal one day a week to one student. But everyone in some way was supposed to fulfill the mitzva to support the study of the Law among Jewish students.

Only a small minority of students were able to attend the yeshiva, the outstanding intellectual elite drawn from the

Gemara kheder. If the parents were Chassidic, however, the boy could not attend the yeshiva, as this was viewed as a center of opposition to Chassidism. There were "buffers" for those unable to continue their studies in the yeshiva. One of these was the bes hamidrash, or House of Study. This was usually the local synagogue, which was seen to be as much a place of study as a place of prayer. The students in the bes hamidrash would study the same subjects pursued in the yeshiva, under the same methods of independent and individual study. One of the learned men in the community would adopt the role of the teacher. But since the teacher's role in advanced study is minimal, the work did not suffer if the bes hamidrash was completely deprived of a teacher.

These students were supported in much the same way as in the yeshiva; poor students were fed through the community by "eating days." The population of the bes hamidrash, however, was different than that found in the yeshiva. One group was often composed of men who interrupted their yeshiva studies because of marriage. They would continue in the local bes hamidrash supported by their fathers-in-law. Others in this group would include those who were devoting themselves to study while their wives earned a living for the family. Another group would consist of workmen, businessmen and tradesmen who, after their daily work, still aspire toward learning, even though they could not belong to the learned men of the community. These latter students, who were not qualified to study independently, were grouped in teams called khevrass. Each khevrass would study a definite

segment of Jewish lore, according to the training and background of the group's members. One khevrass would study only the mishna, or the code of law without the talmudic commentary, another might study the digest of Jewish laws, etc. Sometimes the members of the khevra would hire a melamed to help them through difficulties encountered in their studies. Sometimes the melamed would be a young boy, renowned for his knowledge and learning. This boy would not lose respect because he was not making a profession out of teaching.

The three institutions of learning-- the kheder, yeshiva, and bes hamidrash, and in some larger communities the talmud torah, embrace the total male population of the community, from three-year-olds to old men. The expectation is that the male Jew, from the kheder to his death, will devote some portion of his time to study. No matter how old an individual is, he can continue to explore the limitless intricacies of the Law. During middle-age he must spend part of his life making a living-- unless he is one of the scholarly elite. But after retirement he may again devote all his waking hours to study. Thus, intellectual achievement is a goal throughout the entire life cycle of the Jewish male. ⁵¹

III. Philosophical Beliefs Underlying Jewish Education

In the traditional Jewish culture, study is not an optional activity left to the choice of the individual. It is a divine command, a mitsva. To observe a mitsva is blessed; to violate one is to invite disaster in this life and later. ⁵²

The mitsva of learning is stated in the Bible: "Thou shalt teach them diligently unto they children, and shalt talk of them when thou sitting in thy house, when thou walkest by the way, when thou liest down and when thou risest up."

The process of study itself does not aim at any concrete or immediately utilitarian product. Furthermore, it is far from admirable to make a living from one's learning. A Jew looks with scorn upon one who sells knowledge rather than giving it or sharing it. To share one's knowledge is the most "beautiful" of deeds; to sell it is unworthy. The melamed who teaches the elementary kheder is despised as a symbol of failure, because that is the only way that he has found to support himself and his family. Almost every Jew knows enough to be a melamed, to teach small children the elements of the Law. But almost any Jew would prefer to carry his own studies further, and make his living at some other occupation. In Eastern Europe, the Rabbi did not receive payment for dispensing knowledge of the Law.

The amount of knowledge that is acquired through continuous study is not measured or officially evaluated. There are no degrees marking the completion of a phase of study, for such completion does not exist--"the Torah has no bottom." The diploma that a student receives after a few years in the yeshiva indicates only that he has the right to function as a Rabbi. There is no special scholarly title that he receives. Every Jew, from to tailor who studies a chapter of the Talmud each week in the bes hamidrash to the most learned of scholars is called Reb,

my teacher. This form of address has become equivalent to our "Mister." The title Rov, or Rabbi, is functional rather than academic, and is acquired only when a man begins to serve in that capacity.

The notion of the endless nature of learning can be clearly seen in the attitude toward talmudic study. When an individual has completed a reading of the Talmud, there is a celebration, or siyum, which usually takes place in the bes hamidrash. Then he begins all over again. In describing a man's scholarship, people will talk about how many times he has gone through the Talmud. While the study of the Holy Books may be interrupted, or may diminish in intensity, it never stops.

Just as there is no end to learning, there is no set curriculum. Everyone studies according to his own capacities and background, concentrating on the area of most interest to him. Nor are there any special textbooks for study. There are merely a few editions of the Bible and the Talmud, which differ only in the amount of commentary added to the original text.

Set distinctions between past and present blur in the tradition of Jewish learning. In the yeshiva, the student participates in the discussions between Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shamai who both lived in the first century A.D., or examines the arguments of a 17th century Rabbi who supported one against the other. The student then reaches his own original conclusion. There are no fixed dates in Jewish learning, but more a sense of a continuum which links Rabbi Akiba, Rabbi Hillel, Rashi and the yeshiva student.

This concept of a time continuum between past and present also includes future time. In the days to come, when the Messiah brings together all the Jews and rebuilds the Temple, the learned Jews will study together, and the Lord himself will discuss and give the final solution for the difficult problems which could not be mastered and which were left pending "until the coming of the Messiah."

Jewish learning effaces the limits of space as well as of time. A page of the Gemara looks the same now as it did 200 years ago, and the same in Vilna as in New York City. All over the world, Jews are studying the same Torah, the same Talmud, with the same chant, the nigun. Little children recite the same text as they begin their study of the mishna: "Shnayim okhsim b'tales..." "Two have grasped a piece of cloth."
53

This learned tradition then serves a number of functions. Not only does it transmit Jewish culture, but it is also a prime factor of cohesion, maintaining a sense of unity and continuity in both time and space. Thus the book can then transport the individual into this realm of the sacred, immersing the Jew in the words and the tradition that extend from the distant past into the living present. It has been through the power of the text, and the importance placed on learning, that the Jews have maintained a stable realm in the domain of the intellect, despite the lack of common territory and common national history since the Diaspora.

The content of traditional Jewish learning also defies clearcut boundary lines. The Torah-- which means not only the

Holy Scrolls but all of the Jewish wisdom-- contains the whole Jewish truth, which is also the only truth. It is through the continuous study of the same texts, over and over again, that one comes closer and closer to an understanding of the Divine Law, which is Truth. It is very difficult to understand the truth, and only by analysis of each sentence, each word, only by commentary and interpretation, through searching out new meanings, that one can come gradually, step by step, nearer and nearer to the goal. Yet no matter how much one studies, one can never achieve full understanding. 54

It also follows that since no one can claim to have mastered the whole truth, there is no final human authority. Yet on the other hand, everyone who studies is able to come closer and closer to understanding, and so becomes a relative authority. Each person is striving toward a khidush, a new and original interpretation, and in doing this relies on his own intellectual ability.

A Talmudic story about Moses and Rabbi Akiba illustrates this idea of the importance of new interpretation.

Rabbi Judah said, in the name of Rab: When Moses rose to the heavens he found the Holy One Blessed Be He occupied in tying crown to the letters (of the Torah). He said to Him: "Lord of the Universe, who requires you to do this (i.e. to add to your written word of the Torah)?" He replied: "There is a man who will be (born) several generations from now, and his name will be Akiba the Son of Joseph; he will derive from each jot of the Torah's letters mountains of halachic (legal and religious) conclusions." Said Moses: "Lord of the Universe, show him to me." Replied He: "Turn around." Moses then went out and sat in the eighth row (of Akiba's lecture hall), but could not understand what was being discussed. He felt faint. When the discussion reached a certain point, Rabbi Akiba's students asked him: "Rabbi, whence do you derive this?" And Rabbi Akiba replied, "This is (part of) the halacha given to Moses on Mount Sinai." Moses then felt better. He returned and came before the

Holy One Blessed Be He and said: Lord of the Universe, You have a man like that, yet you gave the Torah through me? To which came the reply, "Be silent! This was my design." (T. Menahot 29B, trans. Israel Scheffler). 55

Thus, even God's word itself is subject to change and interpretation. For man, the prestige earned by learning is a relative one: there is no scholar so wise that his words will not be weighed, examined and questioned.

Jewish learning, although it overrides the limits of time and space, is by no means abstract learning. Every discussion is geared to a concrete situation, one which may be improbable or imaginary, but is never impossible. When an extreme effort of imagination is needed in order to understand a given problem, a parable or a legend will be used to lend concreteness. Thus there is little regard for "pure science" or "pure literature." In such studies there is no direct goal, no takhlis. It is immaterial whether learning is applied now or in days to come, in actual dealings with people or in understanding the motive of an imaginary deed. The principle is, learning must be applied. Thus there is no pure philosophy, pure esthetics or pure mathematics in Jewish learning. Math will be studied in connection with architectural problems, esthetics in connection with ethics or the nature of the divine. Even a piece of fiction must have a moral. Strictly speaking, there is no separation between secular and non-secular fields, as there is no realm of life that is divorced from the Truth and the Law embodied in the sacred books. 56 While the Talmud includes subjects not connected with religion, these topics are always supported by a religious reference.

Truth is then understood in a relativistic manner. As perceived by the imperfect human mind, it is never single and simple, it is never the truth, and it is always subject to interpretation. As illustrated by the above story, even the Torah, the Divine Law, is not absolute, but is subject to alteration. Furthermore, even God does not hold the absolute Truth, as it is not in heaven. The following Talmudic story stresses this point:

On that day R. Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument but they did not accept them. Said he to them: If the halachah agrees with me, let this carob tree prove it!" Thereupon the carob-tree was torn a hundred cubits out of its place--others affirm, four hundred cubits. No proof can be brought from a carob-tree, they retorted. Again he said to them: "If the halachah agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it!" Whereupon the stream of water flowed backwards. "No proof can be brought from a stream of water," they rejoined. Again he urged: "If the halachah agrees with me, let the walls of the school-house (academy) prove it," whereupon the falls inclined to fall. But R. Joshua rebuked them, saying: "When scholars are engaged in a halachic dispute, what have ye to interfere?" Hence they did not fall, in honor of R. Eliezer, and they are still standing thus inclined. Again he said to them: "If the halachah agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven!" Whereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out: "Why do ye dispute with R. Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the halachah agrees with him! But R. Joshua arose and exclaimed: "It is not in heaven." What did he mean by this?-- Said R. Jeremiah: That Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because Thou hast long since written in the Torah at Mount Sinai, After the majority must one incline.

R. Nathan met Elijah and asked him: What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do in that hour?-- He laughed with joy he replied saying, "My sons have defeated Me, My Sons have defeated Me." (Baba Mezia, 59b) 57

Thus, not even God has the final word in matters of dispute or interpretation. This attitude then fosters a tendency to analyze, to probe, and to discuss every phenomenon: to see a problem not in one aspect but in multiple perspectives.

Learning was then sought for its own sake. It was a duty commanded by God, and it was contemptible to exploit this mitzva to gain one's daily bread. While the concept of Jewish learning is inextricably tied to issues of prestige, status and pecuniary gain, it cannot be separated from moral and ethical beliefs. It is still believed in Jewish tradition that the learned man has the greatest opportunity to become the best kind of human being.

NOTES

1. Maller, Julius B. "The role of education in Jewish History" in Louis Finkelstein, The Jews: History, Culture and Religion, vol.III. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1949. Most of the section of the historical background is derived from Maller's article.
2. As a case in point, James Bowen, A History of Western Education. London: Methuen and Co, Ltd., 1972, speaks of Jewish education as only a footnote to Christian and Hellenistic conceptions.
3. Maller, Ibid, p. 897.
4. Ibid, p. 901
5. Ibid.
6. This passage is found in Sifre Deut. E-eb 48, also cited in Maller, p. 902.
7. Abot 2.6, also Maller, p. 902.
8. Abot 3.10, Maller, Ibid.
9. Kiddushin 40b, Maller, Ibid.
10. Abot 4.20, Maller, p. 902.
11. Abot 5.15, Maller, Op Cit., p. 903.
12. Lev. R. 2, Maller, p. 903.
13. Abot 5.21, cited in Maller, p. 903.
14. Shir Ha-Shirin Rabba 1.2, cited Maller, p. 903.
15. Berakot 63b, also Maller.
16. Abot 4.12, Maller p. 903.
17. Taanit 8a, Maller, Ibid.
18. Erubin, 54a, Ibid.
19. quote by Louis Ginzburg, cited in Maller, p. 904.
20. Maller, Ibid., 905.
21. Ibid.

22. Maller, p. 912
23. Maller, p. 909
24. Issac ben Moses of Vienna, Or Zarua, (17th cent), cited in Maller, Op Cit, p. 911.
25. Judah ben Samuel, Yair Natib (Will Light the Path) p. 911 (17th cer)
26. Mark Zborowski, " The Place of Book Learning in Traditional Jewish Culture," Harvard Education Review, vol. XIX, No. 2, Spring, 1949, p. 89.
27. Lerner means studious one, masmid, he who is bending over his books, kharif, the "acute" who excells in pilpul, talmid khokhum, wise student, iluy, genius or superior person, lamdan, erudite one, gaon, genius, and oker horium, uprooter of mountains who excells in pilpul. Zborowski, p. 89.
28. In the earlier periods, scholarship was placed before worldly success. In fact, Rabbis refused to accept payment for their teaching. Thus, this dream of the scholar and the successful businessman should be seen as emerging from the shetl context. See Zborowski, p. 90
29. Ibid, p. 90
30. Ibid, p. 91. The education of women is not treated in this paper due to a deficiency in the primary and secondary sources. Future cases will treat the education of women to the degree that information is available.

The reason that references to girls religious education is sparse is due to the fact that the home was the domain of the Jewish female. The moralists set down a scheme for the training of girls in domestic tasks. They were to learn correct table manners, and get accustomed to household work, etc. Girls were usually taught to read Hebrew in the home so that they would know the prayer book. Very often girls would learn needlework from the melamed's wife while he taught the boys the Torah and Talmud.

Some sources do touch on the issue of women's education, but the discussion is scanty. See Isidore Fishman, Jewish Education in Central Europe, 16th -18th centuries.

It is also important to note that men and women were separated during worship.

In terms of the future life, Olam Habo, the exact nature of this realm is not spelled out, but it is a world in which study prevails. God studied Torah as well, and the Torah becomes objectified as the source of truth. Unlike Aristotle's conception of the divine who contemplates himself, God contemplates his word.

31. Zborowski, Op Cit., p. 92. The contrast between the Greek ideal of beauty is a striking one, where harmony between mind, body and spirit was stressed. The emphasis on the intellect as the source of beauty is unique to this tradition.
32. On the aspect of laughter, Israel Scheffler has pointed out that joy is seen as a form of worship, a sort of commandment to get out of one's melancholy. Laughter, in some senses, was also seen as a form of worship, and melancholy perceived as a sort of sin. (Private communication, December 1981)
33. Ibid, p. 93
34. Zborowski, Ibid, p. 94
35. For a modern interpretation, see Ben Shahn, The Alphabet of Creation, New York, 1954. This sort of belief was not peculiar to the Jews, the Greeks meditated on musical harmonics. For the Greeks as well as the Muslims, letters had numerical meaning. Jewish alphabet mysticism was further developed by the Cabalists.
36. For an excellent and detailed analysis, see Diane Roskies, "Alphabet Instruction in the East European Heder: Some Comparative Notes."
37. Roskies, Ibid. p. 25.
38. In other traditions as well similar practices were observed. In Greece, alphabet letters were drawn on the inside of a bowl, wine was poured in, the letters dissolved, and the solution was given to children to drink. Also, cake letters and soup noodles date back to Roman times and were prepared during the Middle Ages. In Jewish tradition, cakes were used to insure fertility, see Roskies, p. 26-27 for a more detailed analysis.
39. Roskies, p. 28.
40. Ibid., p. 29
41. Ibid.
42. From Hayim Nahman Bialik, "Safiah" in his Sippurim, (Tel Aviv, 1933) cited in Roskies, p. 33.
43. Roskies, Ibid. p. 35
44. Roskies, Ibid. p. 41
45. Roskies, Ibid. On this point, Israel Scheffler has pointed out that one of the maxim's of the yeshiva that he studied in was "find yourself a teacher, and find yourself a friend."

Thus learning was not just between teacher and student, but there was a sense of comraderie among students as well.

46. Roskies, Ibid.
47. Zborowski, Op Cit, p. 94
48. Ibid., p. 97.
49. Ibid., p. 97
50. Ibid., p. 98
51. This is an interesting contrast with the Indian conception of the lifecycle, where the individual begins as a student, moves to the stage where he is a householder, and must earn a living and raise a family, to the stage of the forest dweller or sannyasin, where he renounces his worldly ties and devotes himself to meditation, contemplation, and enlightenment.
52. Howard Gardner raised the question as to why there is such attention given to study and learning in the Jewish tradition, and why this same emphasis does not appear in other traditions. This notion of study as a command of God may lie at the heart of this issue.
53. It would be interesting to raise this question cross-culturally. In Koranic or Christian learning, does the student begin with certain specified texts or chants?
54. There is an interesting connection here with the Buddhist notion of samsara and nirvana. In some schools of Buddhist thought, the philosophy is that there is ultimately no separation between the world of phenomenal reality and that of ultimately, thus no real distinction between sacred and secular.
In terms of the never-ending course of study, Elie Wiesel points out that Talmudic tractates traditionally begin with page two, to remind the reader that even if he knows them from one end to the other, he has not even begun. Elie Wiesel, Souls on Fire: Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters, (New York: Random House, 1970).
55. The author gratefully thanks Israel Scheffler for this translation of the Talmudic story.
56. Again, a comparison can be made here with the Buddhist notion of secular/ sacred. See note 54.
57. The author wishes to thank Israel Scheffler again for mentioning this story. Translation from Sonsino Talmud.

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